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Date _____



What Led to the Chinese Exclusion Act?

Latasha [reflecting] In the early 1900s, Chinese immigrants were detained for months at an immigration facility on Angel Island in San Francisco Bay. I wanted to know why.

...[asking] Why were immigrants detained on Angel Island?

The detentions were a result of The Chinese Exclusion Act:

[reflecting] The first US law to restrict immigration on the basis of race or country of origin.

...[asking] Why did the US government decide this restriction was necessary?

In the 1850s, many Chinese immigrants came to the US for opportunity. They found work in gold mines and later constructing the Transcontinental Railroad. By 1869, the first railroad was complete, and Chinese workers moved to cities.

...[asking] What was life like for them [there]?

Most Chinese immigrants were not planning to stay in the US permanently. The wages they were earning--while low in America--were still far higher than they would have otherwise earned. For these reasons, Chinese workers did not join unions and strikes --and, as a result, companies chose to hire them over white workers.

Many white workers blamed the Chinese for high unemployment and low wages. Plus, in and outside of the workplace, Chinese immigrants were separated from their white neighbors by language, culture, and appearance--as a result, Anti-Chinese sentiment was strong.

A new labor organization, the Workingmen's Party of California, made anti-Chinese policies a main focus of

their platform.

[reflecting] How did the political tension in the West lead to a nationwide ban?

As the Workingmen's Party of California gained influence, tensions exploded into violence. In 1877 a party meeting turned into an anti-Chinese riot, leaving four people dead and property destroyed. Congress felt pressured to do something.

Both parties supported the Exclusion Act in an effort to appeal to voters in the West.

[asking] What did the act mean for Chinese immigrants?

The Chinese Exclusion Act was in effect from 1882 to 1943. It restricted the rights of Chinese people living in the US and placed a moratorium on Chinese immigration.

To process the influx of immigrants from Asia and to enforce this act, the US built an immigration facility on Angel Island. It was designed to be escape-proof, like nearby Alcatraz, and the interrogation of immigrants could take months. Some detainees carved poems about the experience into the walls.

...I imagined it: after weeks at sea, to come so close but still be so far.

While the Chinese Exclusion Act was the first law of its kind, it does not stand alone in US history. Other immigration laws restricting specific groups have followed. And quotas limiting Chinese immigrants, as well as other nationalities, continued until 1965.

Without this turning point, would immigration policy look the way it looks now?

I thought about the Statue of Liberty and what she symbolized to immigrants on the opposite coast.

Has the US historically been a land of opportunity for all immigrants?

In 1885, as the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty was being constructed a Chinese-American student wrote an op-ed. He saw an irony in the nearly concurrent events. He asked whether the statue to liberty or the statute

against the Chinese would be "the more lasting monument to tell future ages of the liberty and greatness of this country."

...I wondered if they could both be lasting monuments, as I stepped off the ferry and walked back to the only city I've ever called home.